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WEEKEND

THE MYANMAR TIMES ISSUE 24 | AUGUST 28, 2015

What lies beneath...

Subterranean
explorations

Dealing
with the **dead**

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Topshot

People hold a candlelight vigil to pay their respects to those who died at Erawan shrine – the popular tourist site where 20 people were killed on August 17 – marking one week since the attack in central Bangkok on August 24.

Photo: AFP/
Nicolas Asfour

Cover Photo:
Kyet Cave, Loikaw,
by Chris Densham

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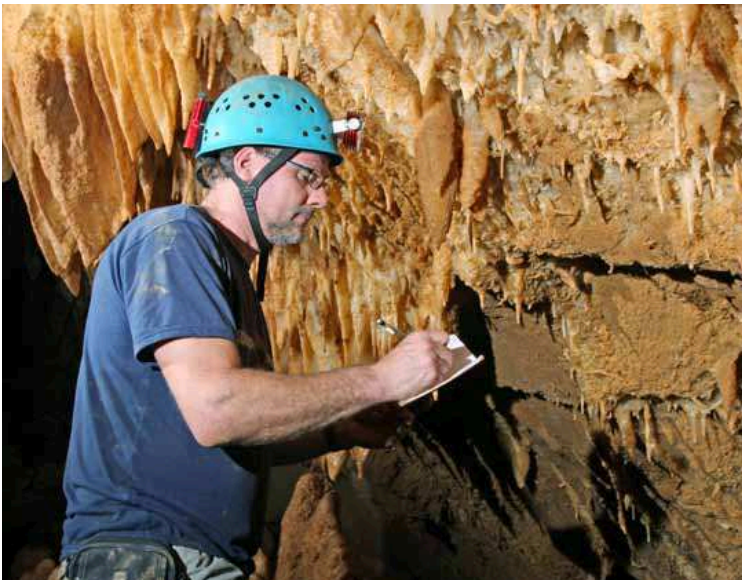
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Subterranean explorations



Exploring a river cave, Loikaw. Photo: Chris Densham



Sketching a map in Kyet Cave, Loikaw. Photo: Chris Densham



Passing coffins in Kyet Cave, Loikaw. Photo: Chris Densham

Myanmar's caves are among the world's least-explored



Swimming in Namun Cave, Pinlaung. Photo: Urs Etter

BY WADE GUYITT

FOR a select few, Myanmar's treasures lie underground – not in the form of buried historical artefacts or yet-to-be-mined metals and gems, but in a vast, uncharted network of caves. For the past six years, a team of international explorers has been mapping a stunning geology unknown to those above, unlocking its secrets while also ensuring it remains in a pristine state.

Since 2010, the Myanmar Cave Documentation Project has been making yearly expeditions to Myanmar, extending the known distance of caves, exploring new ones, and recording the discovery of new species and geological features. Founded by Joerg Dreybrodt, the project was born out of the Northern Lao-European Cave Project, which Dreybrodt started while working in Taiwan.

Dreybrodt was first hooked on speleology – the study or exploration of caves – as a child, when he used to explore cave entrances with his father in nearby mountain ranges in southern Germany.

“Being underground is a different world to experience. First there is darkness, but also a silence occasionally interrupted by sounds of water. The variety of rock formations is amazing, and you never know what is around the next corner. I feel a curiosity to explore where the cave is going, an admiration for the formations, and sometimes a feeling of being scared in a dark, mysterious-looking passage.”

After Dreybrodt first visited Myanmar in 2001, the limestone landscape of the Shan plateau stayed in his mind. The area shares a geological affinity with northern Laos, but – particularly along the western edge of the plateau and along the Thanlwin (Salween) River – it has never been properly explored. Yet its massive limestone formations caused by erosion, called karsts, promise large cave systems below.

As above, so below: Myanmar's isolation from the world over the past 60 years has largely kept its vast subterranean splendours unknown to science. The British used caves for weekend outings during the colonial era, and later a significant find came with the Pindaya discovery, with its prehistoric paintings, in 1960 by geologist U Khin Maung Kyaw. But proper mapping is hard to find.

“Even from the British colonial era, there are no records except for the area of Moulmein. It is very rare in the world to have such a large area uninvestigated,” Dreybrodt said.

In the modern age, Australian caver John Dunkley managed to use a one-week visa to explore a surprisingly large area in 1988. One of the caves he predicted near Pinlaung was finally explored by the project 25 years later. But other than a handful of short expeditions by small parties since, the project had little information from historical surveys to go on.

Fortunately, news of a new cave possibility came from the least likely of places: an Air Bagan in-flight magazine article showed pictures of Htam Sam cave near Hopon. “Our local contact sent us a copy and we later found very nice and long river caves in this area. So sometimes incidents get things going, rather than a long study of maps.”

In 2010, a four-person expedition explored caves near

Taunggyi and Hopon in southern Shan State, mapping 2.9 kilometres of passages in six separate caves, and identifying many more. The next year, a six-person team returned and, before exploring near Kutkai and Lashio, extended Hopon Spring Cave east of Taunggyi to 1655 metres.

“We had two separate teams going to different areas, one to the spring cave entrance and another to an undescended shaft at the surface. It was a big surprise when we met in a huge chamber with a daylight shaft connecting the two entrances.”

One of the team's proudest accomplishments to date has been the survey of Namun Spring Cave near Pinlaung. This was the cave predicted in 1988 and only reached 25 years later. “The variety is amazing, with a blue entrance lake, 40m climbs, large halls, big spiders, passages you drift in, sinter pools – when I held the final survey sketch in my hands, I felt close to the cave, ‘knowing’ it now.”

As well as publishing its findings in detail, the project has established a cave database with about 600 objects of interest, which it has shared with an international NGO active in karst and biodiversity conservation. The database will help to identify areas that need protection for their ecological significance.

“Caves are very fragile,” Dreybrodt said. “They form over hundreds of thousands of years, with an extreme variety of dripstone formations and a unique history determined by surface conditions like precipitation and soil. If something is touched or taken out, it is not recoverable.”

Dreybrodt advocates for caves to be made protected areas, so that these ecosystems can continue to thrive. Stalagmites and other features, he says, “are like trees, keeping within them a climate record”. Using dating techniques, we can learn about climate conditions thousands of years ago. And, Dreybrodt said, “Myanmar is unique here, since it is located in areas of different monsoon influences and key in climate models.”

Project members are also aware that letting the public get a glimpse of caves first-hand can be a good way to share knowledge, stoke enthusiasm and promote preservation. That's why it also works to draw attention to suitable sites for ecotourism. Establishing public access to caves means marking paths, not destroying formations and staying out of areas with fragile “sinter”, or mineral spring deposit, formations. But more effort will be needed to protect caves from the large-scale limestone quarries, which threaten to destroy untold numbers of species and habitats.

While travel off the beaten path has been historically difficult in Myanmar, the Myanmar Cave Documentation Project has been backed from the beginning by the Ministry of Tourism and the Myanmar Tourism Promotion Board.

“I was several times astounded at what support local government employees gave in order to get us to the cave entrances. The hoops were more often in the restricted areas, understanding where can we go and especially how, with few roads. It took time to figure this out. Coming back again and being persistent is the key – and also the fascination of exploration and discovery,” Dreybrodt said.

Myanmar's most well-known caves – such as Kayin State's Saddar Cave near Hpa-an, or the Htam Sam cave near Hopon, which was the subject of the in-flight article – are often visited, but more for their status as religious shrines than for their natural splendour. Just as Buddhists in Myanmar often crown hilltops with pagodas, so have cave mouths become a place for Buddha statues.

“In the Buddhist caves we have to remove our footwear and survey with bare feet, sometimes in between pilgrim groups. Astonishingly, people are very patient about it.”

Past the entrances, however, Myanmar's longer caves tend to be unexplored. Those with rivers or vertical shafts in particular are untouched by humans, because without substantial training and proper equipment the dangers of exploring them are too great.

One surprising find came at a well-known religious site, Kyet Cave near Loikaw: “It is known for its coffins in the entrance area, and is frequented by Buddhist pilgrims. What was not known is the amazing length of 2200m, making it the third-longest cave in Myanmar.”

The lack of previous mapping – and the precarious terrain – means the international group needs to work closely with local guides and residents to do its work. “Without them we could never find the often hidden entrances.”

One bystander, he remembers, became especially interested: a monk who was curious why every day they walked for hours to reach the same cave. He asked to come along.

“We pushed him in a rubber ring over a lake, helped him climbing the boulders and a shaft. He was anxious, but happy.” Also happy, when the team returned six hours later, were the guides who had stayed on the surface and were fearing the worst. For the monk, however, it was a trip to remember – and one benefit of the expedition comes in reporting on what's inside the caves to those who have lived near them all their lives but never been able to explore them.

While Dreybrodt hopes one day a Myanmar caving association will be founded, for now the project has not yet heard of any local caving groups, aside from perhaps some curious geology students or local villagers exploring the entrances.

“We would love to get into contact with interested people. Our time is limited to one or two visits for two-to-three weeks a year. Local cavers could cover much more area.”

Trips planned for next year include Loikaw in Kayah State, to explore the other large river caves there, as well as further exploration of Ywangan. What keeps Dreybrodt coming back – to caves, and, by extension, to Myanmar – “is the possibility to discover something unknown to most people and to experience this with caver friends who feel the same way”.

“Where else in the world can you discover something new? Most is known from the surface – caves not.”

Any local or international cavers with an interest in Myanmar are encouraged to get in touch with the project. Visit www.myanmarcaves.com to find out more.



Posing with a temporary expedition member, Namun Cave, Pinlaung. Photo: Urs Etter

Myanmar's longest caves ... so far

Courtesy: Myanmar Cave Documentation Project

Cave	Location	Length (m)	Year surveyed
1 Khauk Khaung (Stone Cave)	Ywangan	4790	2012-14
2 Namun Spring Cave	Pinlaung	2628	2013-14
3 Kyet Cave	Loikaw	2194	2015
4 Yae Htwet Kyote Khine Gu (Stone Spring Cave)	Ywangan	1917	2014
5 Mondowa Gu	Taunggyi	1770	1998
6 Hopon Spring Cave	Hopon	1655	2011
7 Na Gar Gu (Dragon Cave)	Ywangan	1654	2014
8 White Water Buffalo and Tiger Cave	Hopon	1343	2010
9 Red river cave	Bawlakhe	1275	2015
10 Happy Monk Cave	Hopon	975	2010
11 Leikte Gu	Kalaw	960	1998
12 Maung Nyunt Sinkhole	Pinlaung	900	2005
13 Naung See Cave 2	Kutkai	859	2011
14 Sadan Gu	Hpa-An	800	2009